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Iranian middleman scorns Tower report

By Michael Hedges
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The Iranian middleman in U.S. weapons deals with Tehran said the Tower commission suppressed important information about the transactions and published other details that may have resulted in deaths in the Middle East.

Manucher Ghorbanifar said he will stress the shortcomings of the Tower commission report during an early April meeting with congressional investigators.

"They didn't publish many important statements of fact," said Mr. Ghorbanifar in a recent interview with Arnaud de Borchgrave, editor in chief of The Washington Times.

"We showed them the certified documents from the Credit Suisse Bank, how all the transactions took place. ... What the Tower report published on the transactions is laughable."

Mr. Ghorbanifar, who was roundly criticized by the three-man board probing the Iran-Contra affair, said their report clumsily printed "very

sensitive stuff, clearly not designed for publication because lives were at stake."

He did not specifically identify the material in the report or those for whom the information might have proved fatal. But, he said, "Three people have now disappeared: Dead, from what I hear."

His criticism of the CIA was equally tough. The agency's meddling in the Iran deals resulted in at least one hostage being retained despite plans for his release, Mr. Ghorbanifar said.

He branded former National Security Adviser Robert McFarlane "a fool," claiming Mr. McFarlane blew any chance of getting hostages out of Iran when he misread the situation during a fateful trip to Tehran.

In an unusually candid interview, Mr. Ghorbanifar, whom the CIA has called a liar and whose testimony was described as "a colorful story" by Tower board member Edmund

Muskie, challenged many critical tenets of the commission's report.

The attack on the commission's findings puts Mr. Ghorbanifar, a shadowy figure who insinuated himself into U.S. and Israeli overtures to Iran, on course with official comments now coming from Tehran.

Iranian President Ali Khamenei has said the Tower report was "largely fictional" and that Iran soon will publish a report of its own refuting the board's conclusions.

Iranian Prime Minister Mir Hossein Moussavi described the com-

mission's work as "more like a fiction fabricated by the melancholic mind of McFarlane or worked out with cooperation ... to restore lost credibility of the U.S."

Mr. Ghorbanifar charged that the CIA bungled the U.S.-Iran negotiations by opening a second channel for selling arms through George Cave, a retired CIA agent who went to Tehran with Mr. McFarlane and White House national security aide Lt. Col. Oliver North in May 1986.

"Cave was the real operator," Mr. Ghorbanifar said. "And he was led to believe that [Iranian Parliament Speaker Ali-Akbar Hashemil Rafsanjani could overthrow [Ayatollah Ruhollah] Khomeini," he said. "That is where the U.S. went off the rails. Through me, the U.S. was dealing with the legitimate government of Iran, and through Cave they they were dealing with what they thought was a conspiracy against Khomeini."

The CIA and Mr. Ghorbanifar have equally low opinions of each other, according to documents quoted in the Tower report. Mr. Cave had been "a little bit horrified" when he discovered the Iranian middleman was involved, it said.

The CIA had stopped using Mr. Ghorbanifar as a source in 1983 at Mr. Cave's insistence, claiming he had lied to the agency. The CIA said Mr. Ghorbanifar flunked a lie detector test he was given in Washington

in January 1986, and the agency actively lobbied to have him cut out of the hostage negotiations, according to the Tower report.

Mr. Ghorbanifar said the CIA's eagerness to circumvent him led it to

undercut the price on arms offered Iran by Col. North by going to another faction in the Iranian government with a better deal.

"The CIA, even though they knew the exact price [offered by Col. North], still went ahead and made a deal at a much cheaper price. ... A very dirty double game."

According to Mr. Ghorbanifar, the Iranians were set to release two hostages with another two to follow when they received Mr. Cave's offer, which only required them to free one person.

As a result, Mr. Ghorbanifar said, only one hostage, the Rev. David Jacobsen, was released. Immediately afterward, Col. North and Israeli counterterrorism adviser Amiram Nir called to apologize for Mr. Cave's meddling, Mr. Ghorbanifar said.

Just as damaging to the hostage release talks in Tehran last May was Mr. McFarlane's failure to grasp Iranian nuances, he said.

"McFarlane was a fool," Mr. Ghorbanifar said, "a nobody. He had no idea how to deal with Iranians. He played no role in that secret mission to Tehran. He just killed any deal by walking away."

According to Mr. Ghorbanifar, at the point Mr. McFarlane cut off the talks, "He had Iranian officials on their knees begging him to stay, but he was stubborn. He said, 'I get four hostages now, or the bags go back on the plane. . . .'"

Mr. Ghorbanifar said he has been frustrated by U.S. failure to investigate his account of the arms deals. But he said he hopes to be vindicated when he meets with congressional investigators in Paris next month.

"Within two weeks we will prove that the CIA lied and that they are the ones who got President Reagan into such hot water. [Investigators] will get the day-to-day chronology that led to the crisis. They will know who are the liars and where the money is."